



## BEING OR DOING IN THE AIR FORCE

COL. 'NED STARK'  
COMMENTARY

FEBRUARY 21, 2019



*“There are two career paths in front of you, and you have to choose which path you will follow.*

*One path leads to promotions, titles, and positions of distinction [...] The other path leads to doing things that are truly significant for the Air Force, but the rewards will quite often be a kick in the stomach because you may have to cross swords with the party line on occasion. You can’t go down both paths, you have to choose. [...] To be or to do, that is the question.” —Col. John*

Boyd

Life is about choices. We can't control what happens to us, but we always have a choice in how to respond. Those choices reveal who we are. I once heard it said that we tend to judge people based on their actions even though we judge ourselves based on our intentions. There is some truth to that, but I'd like to suggest it's not just our intentions, it's also our rationalizations — the explanations we create for ourselves to justify the choices we've made. Many hear John Boyd's remarks quoted above and convince themselves that it's a false dichotomy — they can both be and do. I think it is a possible but rare thing. We all like to think we are the exception, but the odds are heavily stacked against that. I'd like to suggest there's a spectrum with the pure careerist at one end and the pure doer at the other. Few, if any, people reside at the polar ends, but it's safe to say the pressures and expectations at senior ranks tend to push people further toward the careerist pole the higher they climb in the ranks.

The e-mail engagements I have had with some of my readers who have reached out have been illuminating. Through that correspondence and my own networks, I can point to several general officers as examples of those who have compromised themselves in an effort "to be," but for sake of brevity I will briefly describe two. One general actively advises proteges to avoid e-mail or any form of note taking to escape accountability for any decisions or discussions. This general is held in low regard by past and current superiors yet continues to advance because there is no accountability for missed opportunities. In other words, this general successfully avoids all meaningful risk by pursuing a strategy of inaction. Another general officer mischaracterized his knowledge about an issue to investigators, thereby leaving a subordinate "holding the bag" for years while a needless and protracted investigation ensued. The investigation eventually cleared the subordinate of any wrong doing but not before it destroyed the individual's personal life and professional aspirations. In the meantime, that general was promoted again.

I have little doubt both of those generals started off as bright, capable, and well-intentioned officers, but somewhere along the line, they, and many others, have lost their way. I don't think many folks start off their careers thinking to themselves, "Gosh, I'd really like to stab a bunch of folks in the back to get ahead today," or "Man, I really need to avoid making any decisions if at all possible." How then did they and many others end up that way? Because the system incentivizes that behavior as evidenced by their steady rise through the ranks to two and three-star generals. Some see this happening and shake their heads, but others take note and attempt to model what they see as success.

This isn't a new phenomenon. One of the officers who has reached out to me shared a *New York Times* article from 1988 titled "Washington Talk: Military Careers; Air Force and Marines Battle 'Ticket-Punchers'," in which reporter Richard Halloran quoted the then-commander of the Air Force Personnel Center, Maj. Gen. Ralph Havens. In a letter to the entire Air Force, he wrote:

Because we are such a large organization, we have many built-in factors that tend to pressure our officers to operate from a careerist's perspective. Maybe it's time for all of us to ask ourselves whether or not we're ready to take on any task, any time, any place [...] It will require a basic philosophical change on an individual and on an institutional level.

There is little doubt the Air Force has failed in its efforts to curb the careerist "ticket-punchers." If the past is any indication (and it usually is), the system will only change enough to provide the appearance of reform, and business practices will emerge to perpetuate the status quo. The only real hope for change is internal and cultural. This summer, like every summer, half of the commanders in the Air Force will turn over. They and the people who come after them will decide if and how the Air Force is going to change.

To that end, I will do my best to describe the characteristics of doers and careerists in the hopes that people at an individual level make conscious choices about who they want to be and some techniques for ensuring they remain true to themselves. I do not mean to suggest that I'm some sort of paragon. I have made my own careerist choices. My hope is that I can point out some key features of the terrain so the officers just beginning their careers can do better than I have.

## **Careerists Versus Doers**

Careerists seek to control their environment to maximize their personal benefit using power. Careerists see variables (especially people they do not control) as risks or, worse, threats. Control is an all-or-nothing thing and difficult to have over other human beings. This is why careerists like to surround themselves with and promote other careerists: They value personal loyalty over institutional loyalty. If individuals are loyal to an ideal (e.g., their Constitutional obligations or Air Force values), they are difficult to control because they will do things that may not be in the careerist's interest. On the other hand, a careerist can control subordinate careerists through incentives and threats related to job opportunities and promotion. Meaningful differences of opinion and thinking are viewed as disloyal and are not tolerated. Failure is avoided at all costs because it reduces personal power. At the more extreme end of the careerist spectrum are those like the generals I described earlier.

Doers, on the other hand, tend to be more principle-based and actively seek diversity of thought in the hopes of advancing the mission. Doers seek to empower and are willing to assume personal career risk in pursuit of an ideal. Careerists view doers as naïve. Doers see variables as opportunities instead of threats. Power is seen as a blunt instrument to be used as a last resort when attempts to reason or influence have failed. Beth Kuhel from Forbes' Coaches Council writes,

Pressure to achieve doesn't override an influence leader's compassion for people when they make a mistake. Actually, influence leaders encourage people to take calculated risks, accept failure and get back in the game with renewed knowledge of the problem. They don't fear failure as much as they fear not trying to find innovative solutions.

One of the best examples I can think of is President Abraham Lincoln as captured in Doris Kearns Goodwin's Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln surrounded himself with rivals because he knew the tension and diversity of thought would help him be a more effective president. In Meditations, Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius writes, "The measure of a man is the worth of the things he cares about." Doers question and check themselves to ensure they are doing things for the right reason — that they are willing to sacrifice for something bigger than themselves.

Perhaps most concerning, however, is the careerist who appears to be a doer. My own experiences and interactions as Ned have been very illuminating on that front. Many careerists talk a good game, and some may even believe what they say, but eventually their actions will reveal the truth of the matter. In my personal experience, the litmus test centers around personal risk. The careerist asks others to assume risk and the doer assumes risk. Careerists will hedge (i.e., play it safe) and doers will step out boldly because they believe it's the right thing to do regardless of the outcome. As you might imagine, the greatest risk to the doer is the "careerist in the doers clothing" because these individuals will seek to manipulate the doer into advancing their interests. The doer takes the risk and, if it works out, the careerist steps in to share the limelight. If things don't work out, however, the careerist will leave the doer swinging in the wind.

## **Why It Matters**

Some may dismiss the significance of a distinction between careerists and the doers. Careerists have to perform if they are going to be promoted, right? In a way, yes. Fundamentally, and at the risk of over-simplification, I would like to suggest that there is a difference in motives and outcomes between the two groups that has significant ramifications for the Air Force. Are you choosing to do something because it benefits you or because it benefits your people and the mission? These are not necessarily mutually exclusive options, but what is the primary motivation? It matters.

As it relates to outcomes, the careerists avoid risk and therefore will not pursue bold strategies to prepare the nation for future conflict. As discussed in my [first article](#), the careerist prefers the personally safe course of incremental improvements and growing empires. They pursue incremental improvements right into obsolescence. The doers tend to put personal interest aside and consequently are willing to pursue bold strategies. Look at what the service is doing today and ask yourself: Is the Air Force is doing something bold to address digital-age threats or is it doing more of the same? Do you feel like the Air Force has a bold vision to maintain global dominance in air, space, and cyber space? When I entered the service, the Air Force was uncontested. A decade ago, it started talking about “near-peer threats,” and now it talks about how the Air Force and military are lagging behind adversaries in some critical areas. It may talk a good game but follow the money and ask yourself if the Air Force is truly posturing itself to fight and win in the digital age or if it is continuing to invest in a 1970s warfighting construct. Risk-averse and incremental strategies are what we reap when people who think that way are at the top. More than anything, this is why the distinction matters.

Many great people start off as doers but end up becoming careerists without knowing that it’s happening. They sometimes convince themselves that they have more to lose to justify their actions or inactions. It begins with the little things like not speaking up when you know you should. [In the words of Dr. Martin Luther](#)

King, Jr., “A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true.” I have started down that path a few times and it was only because of some guardrails I’ve put in place that I haven’t ended up in a worse place as a leader.

## **The Guardrails**

Everyone needs guardrails in life because we are all human and inherently fallible. I do not presume to have all of the answers, but I would like to offer some the things that I’ve found that have helped me — most of them discovered when reflecting on a cringe-worthy choice. My guardrails are based on maintaining humility. Leaders have to cultivate a real sense of humility, and it’s hard to maintain when everyone is telling you how great you are. It takes conscious and active effort to cultivate the humility necessary to counteract the ego-boosting effect of selection for highly competitive opportunities. Real humility comes from understanding that others can perform as well or better than you, success is fleeting, and you did not accomplish anything by yourself. Truly humble people don’t just say it, they know it to be true. They are confident enough in who they are that they don’t feel threatened by it.

The first way you can improve your humility is to surround yourself with people you trust to speak the truth to you and hold you accountable. This is hard because if you’ve selected the right people, they will tell you things about your choices that you won’t like. They will hold up the mirror of accountability and point out all of your flaws. They will do so because they care about you and want the best for you. Everyone needs people like this in their personal and professional lives because it is extremely difficult to be objective about ourselves. A purist would say it’s impossible. Consequently, you have to encourage people to tell you things that may be unpleasant to hear and then reward them when they do. It’s human to want to push those people away. As a leader, there are no shortage of people willing to justify and rationalize any choice you want to make, either because they like you or

because you have the power to advance their careers. You have to steer clear of those folks and seek the truth speakers. If you can't find them in your unit, you need to reach out across the base or make use of technology to build a long-distance network.

The second way to maintain your sense of perspective and humility is reflection. John Dewey is credited with observing, “We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.” By way of example, one of the greatest leaders in history was Marcus Aurelius. He reflected every day and kept a journal to capture his thoughts, which became the book Meditations. You should read it and do your best to incorporate some form of this practice that you can sustain. No one is perfect, but we should all strive to be better. Take time to reflect on the decisions you've made. If you personally benefited from any of those choices, either by action or inaction, you need to scrutinize your motives closely to ensure you are doing things for the right reasons — reasons that advance the mission and take care of your people and not yourself.

The third and final way I try to maintain my humility and perspective is by actively serving those more junior to me by taking the time to mentor and coach anyone who asks. Despite its best efforts, the Air Force will never succeed in trying to force meaningful mentorship and feedback. Mentoring and coaching are relationships and, like any relationship, it can't be forced. It's only as good as the time and effort put into it. Building those relationships are tremendously worthwhile because both parties benefit. Every teacher knows the best way to really learn a subject is to explain it to another. The junior member benefits from the experience and wisdom of the mentor. Real mentorship and coaching require candor, which is something that is missing from most of the feedback in the Air Force. Do what you can to inspire people to want to be better, not just affirmed. The quote at the start of this article came from one of John Boyd's mentoring sessions.

**So Where Do You Want to Go?**



The evaluation and promotion system matter because people matter. Wars are fought and lost by people, so we need to ensure our best are preparing us for and, if necessary, leading us in war. The Air Force needs a better promotion system, but any system can be gamed. To really fix the evaluation and promotion system, the Air Force's culture must become intolerant of box-checking, ticket-punching careerists. The Air Force needs to stop promulgating promotion checklists (e.g., high potential officer criteria) and look at performance in a more objective way. The shift in focus will take officers' attention off of professional military education as the objective and make it a tool that helps improve operational performance. The implications are not limited to officers. If the Air Force embraces this concept, it will stop all enlisted promotion testing and not just the testing for senior noncommissioned officers. What good is a test on knowledge if an individual cannot apply that knowledge effectively? Put simply, we should care more about what an individual does than what they know. If we are educating and developing our people properly, the knowledge is a prerequisite for superior performance. If it is not, why are we testing people on it? That's the road where "to be" means you have to continue "to do" in an operational context.

The evaluation and promotion system are one part of the equation, but even more important are the people in the system. It's incumbent on each of us to decide if we are going to be a ticket-puncher or a doer — a choice that has to be reaffirmed every day. Please be a doer. Have a vision, move out boldly and support those who do the same. Talk to your subordinates from the heart to reinforce values and inspire; don't talk from carefully prepared talking points. Be authentic, humble, and thankful for the opportunities you've been given. Take time to reflect and get better regularly, lest you look in the mirror one day and be unhappy with what you see. Put down your promotion recommendation form, stop obsessing about the stratification on your performance report, and just focus on doing right by your airmen and the mission. It doesn't matter if you are an airman basic or a general — say what you know should be said. Respectfully, of course, but say whatever "it" is and stand by it. Don't just let the more bold among you be your stalking horse.

For my part, I remain Ned for now — not because of career risk concerns, but because Ned is more difficult to marginalize or dismiss than a specific colonel. As Ned, I could be any colonel from any career field. Generals wonder if Ned works for them, and many junior officers and non-commissioned officers wonder if they work for Col. Stark. There's goodness in that, so I will remain Ned for a short while longer.

BECOME A MEMBER

*Col. 'Ned Stark' is an Air Force officer. His opinions are his alone and do not represent those of the U.S. Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any part of the U.S. government, but he hopes one day they will come closer.*

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COMMENTARY

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